

WESTERN

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Severnside Edition

40p

Hello Grattan,
All the best,
David T.

CONCORDE
- ON THE EDGE
OF SPACE
(a picture for you)

New wave of travellers flock to the West and set up illegal camps

INVASION OF THE GYPSIES

By Chris Roe
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RESIDENTS reacted with horror last night after gypsies set up a new illegal camp in a West village.

Six caravans arrived in the middle of the night to set up home on a patch of rare wetland in Yatton, north Somerset.

Within hours of arriving at the four-acre field, which they had bought at auction, the newcomers were flouting planning laws.

They built an eight-foot-high fence, laid down hardcore flooring and set up two portable toilets.

Locals reacted with "horror and shock" and have organised an emergency public meeting to force the authorities to take action.

Conservationists are equally concerned, as the land at Moore Lane is home to some of the country's rarest plants.

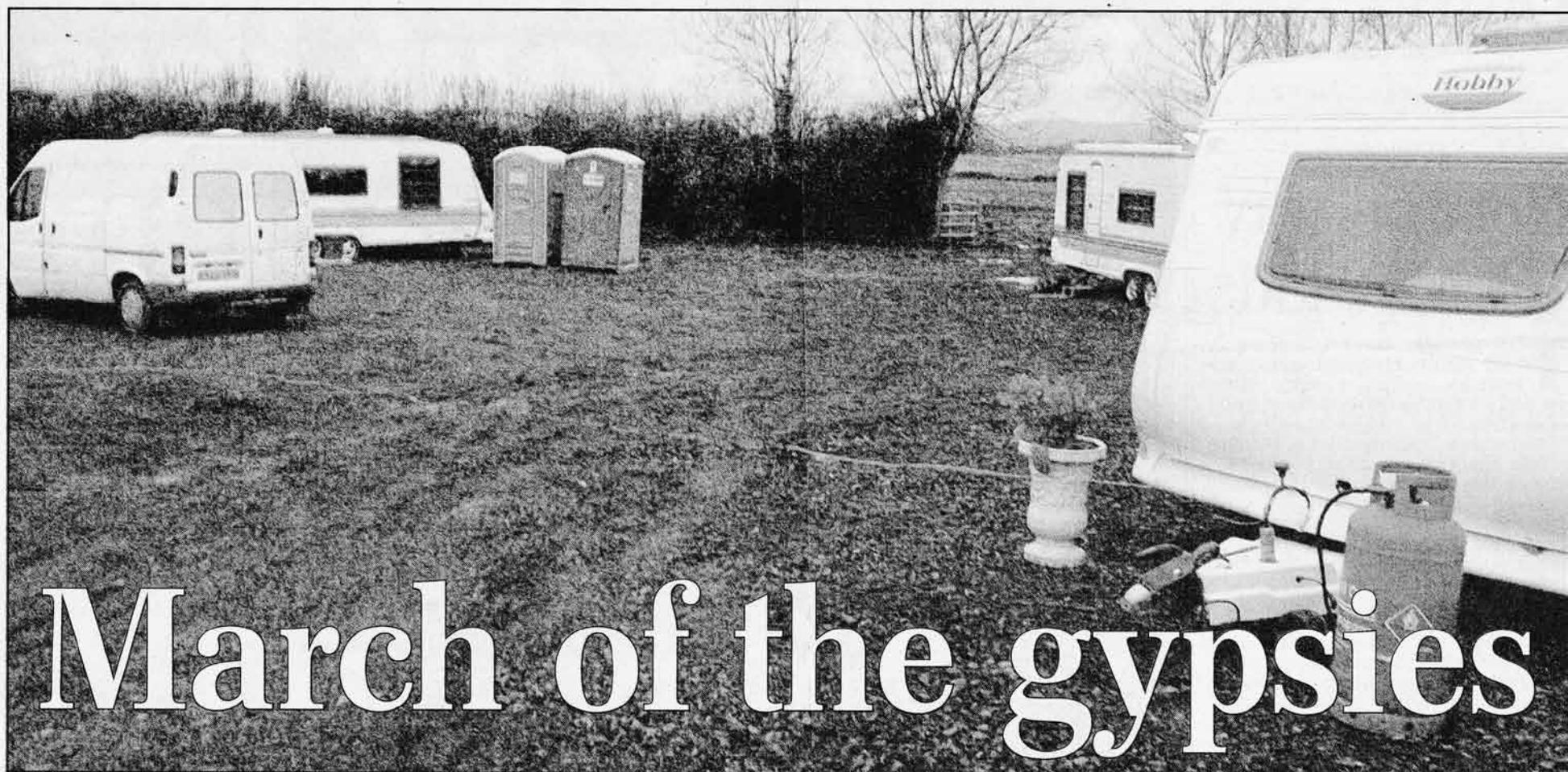
The latest encampment comes hot on the heels of the illegal gypsy site set up in North Curry, near Taunton.

There, unwanted visitors arrived late at night and, without any planning permission, set about building work immediately.

Yatton resident Dan Cooper said yesterday: "If this is allowed to continue there is going to be anarchy."

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Travellers strike again, setting up another illegal camp in the West



March of the gypsies

Gypsy anger: Residents in Yatton, North Somerset, are furious after travellers set up an illegal camp during the night last week. Neighbours have accused the travellers of exploiting the planning laws

By Alison Short
and Chris Roe

THE wave of illegal gypsy camps sweeping across the West Country grew larger still last night as a family of travellers set up camp on a patch of rare wetland in North Somerset.

Following the lead of dozens of other travelling families who have wreaked havoc in the West, the gang exploited loopholes in planning law to buy a four-acre piece of land in Yatton.

The convoy of six caravans arrived on the plot near Moore Lane during the night last week, to the outrage of those living nearby.

Residents say they were "horified and shocked" when the travellers pitched up in the quiet neighbourhood lined with smart houses.

Conservationists were equally distressed by the gypsies' arrival onto land that supports some of the rarest species of plant in the country.

"If this is allowed to continue there is going to be anarchy," said local resident Don Cooper.

"It seems that this group of people are above the law and we are making a stand."

Within hours of their arrival the brazen newcomers had erected an

8ft-high fence, laid down hardcore flooring, set up two portable toilets and named their illegal new encampment "Kenn-Moore Park".

For those living nearby, their actions are beyond contempt.

Disgruntled residents have called a public meeting at Hangstones Pavilion in Yatton for next Monday at 7.30pm. Leaflets are being circulated and organisers hope local Tory MP Dr Liam Fox will attend.

Mr Cooper said: "They are always talking about their human rights, but what about ours? To me it is a matter of principle. If you or I went down to the council and applied for planning permission there you would not get it.

"It strikes me that if you are a law-abiding citizen these days they will have you. I have rights. I saved

to buy my house because it has a nice view. Now this, and the value of the house, are threatened."

English Nature, which has classified the land as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), admitted it is "concerned" by the gypsies presence on the plot.

Conservation officer Karen Pollock visited the site yesterday to assess the situation.

"This area of lowland wetland is extremely rare and is of national importance. There are more than 50 species of water beetle in the ditches as well as rare cuckoo flowers, marsh marigolds and rootless duckland," she said.

"We are taking advice and are trying to formulate a plan of what to do at the moment."

Meanwhile, residents were last

night bursting with indignation at the way planning laws had been brazenly flouted by the arrivals.

Most were too nervous of reprisals to be named.

"I think everyone feels the same really - horrified and shocked," said one woman who lives nearby.

She, like others, thought the paddock now occupied by six caravans, generators and portable toilets, was to be used for Shetland ponies.

"I bought this house because I wanted to live near civilisation but still have the rural surroundings.

"I know they have got to live somewhere and it is unfortunate if it happens to be by you. But it is the way they take no notice of anything anyone else says."

Another neighbour agreed. "How can people without planning per-

mission just go on there and set these places up?" he said.

"If they can, it becomes total anarchy as far as I can see. What is the point of having all these sites that are conserved for the future if people can do what they like?"

Another woman living nearby, who admitted having "nimby" feelings, said: "I don't see why anybody should get permission by applying for it retrospectively. It makes a mockery of the law."

The land at the centre of the controversy was put up for auction in June with a guide price of £25,000.

A "For Sale" sign at the site disappeared a few weeks ago. At the time, locals wondered if it had been sold or simply removed from sale.

A woman who declined to give her name but said she was the owner of the site spoke to the Western Daily Press yesterday.

She refused to say how much she paid for the site, but said a "local" travelling family of 11 people, including three children, is living there.

They moved down on Thursday from an official camp site in Clevedon, unhappy with mud on that site.

She said: "If this was a house and we bought it then people won't say anything. But people are prejudiced against travelling people - they tar us all with the same brush. We are all Christians. We are not here to harm anybody."

The sites causing controversy in our region

- North Curry, Somerset: Villagers reacted furiously when 16 gypsy caravans moved on to a field they had bought, and immediately started to flout planning rules.
- Poundbury, Dorset: About 60 Romany gypsies set up home on land here this summer but were met with fierce opposition from locals and were quickly evicted.
- Sherborne Estate, Gloucestershire: A group

of Romanies has littered this National Trust site with dozens of scrap cars since arriving there 18 months ago.

■ Gloucester: About 20 families in caravans spent £300,000 buying and building illegal developments on a site on Naas Lane in September.

■ Minety, Wiltshire: A long-running dispute surrounding a camp of 16 caravans that has yet to be resolved.